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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN ELITE OPTIMISTIC ABOUT NEW GOVERNMENT,
REFORM; THE STREET, MUCH LESS SO

REF: AMMAN 7507

Classified By: CDA David M. Hale for reasons 1.5 (b) (d)

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) A recent opinion poll showed that, despite falling confidence in government on the part of "ordinary" citizens, "opinion leaders" have higher hopes for the success of the new government's reform agenda. Embassy sources split along similar lines, with members of the well-educated elite more upbeat about reform than more street-wise Jordanians. One reason for this dichotomy may be the extensive campaign of personal contacts PM Fayez has undertaken with politicians, MPs, and opposition elements in the elite since taking office. END SUMMARY.

AND THE POLL SAYS . . .

2. (U) The Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) at Jordan University released a public opinion poll November 10 regarding public expectations for the new government. This was the latest in a series of CSS polls conducted as successive governments are sworn in to gauge popular expectations of government performance. The poll showed a continuation of a trend of slipping confidence in government among "ordinary" Jordanians. Interestingly, however, the poll showed that "opinion leaders" were less pessimistic -- or even optimistic -- on the government's ability to fight the country's economic woes. Opinion leaders -- senior officials, journalists and writers, and leaders in universities, political parties and professional associations -- were also more optimistic that the new government would successfully tackle King Abdullah's political reform agenda. Faris Breizat, coordinator of the CSS Public Opinion Unit, stated that this was "the first time that opinion leaders appear to be less pessimistic than the national sample on major issues."

3. (U) On the economic front, 26 percent of the national sample believed the government would be successful in fighting poverty, while the corresponding figure among opinion leaders was 35 percent. 41 percent of the national sample believed that the government would succeed in reducing corruption, while 48 percent of opinion leaders held this view. With respect to political reform, 49 percent of the general public expressed optimism for progress on political development and a modern political parties law, compared to 56 percent of opinion leaders.

4. (U) Both the national sample and opinion leaders were considerably more optimistic about the government's capability to achieve its foreign policy goals (an unprecedented 68 percent among the general public and 75 percent among opinion leaders) and to empower women in the political and social arena (66 percent and 71 percent, respectively, among the national sample and opinion leaders).

WHY THE DIFFERENCE?

5. (U) According to Breizat, the greater enthusiasm among opinion-makers could be because of "the more than 400 telephone calls and personal contacts that the Premier made to public opinion leaders and representatives of political parties, social, economic and political institutions" after being installed (see ref). With respect to confidence levels for certain issues being notably higher than others, Breizat attributed the difference to King Abdullah. "On issues in which His Majesty is known to get personally involved, such as foreign policy and foreign investment, expectations of success are very high," commented Breizat.

A VIEW FROM THE GOVERNMENT AND COURT

16. (SBU) In a series of courtesy calls on the new ministers, the Ambassador found an unusually high level of enthusiasm, feeling of empowerment, and certainty of the King's desire to see political and economic reform move forward.

17. (C) Hussein Adwan, Director of the Office of Crown Prince Hamzeh, pointed out the poll results to PolCouns and said that he agreed wholeheartedly with them. Adwan noted that elite Jordanians had high expectations for the new government and were upbeat about prospects for the future. This was particularly true among the younger generation of Jordanian elites. According to Adwan, Jordan was the only Arab country that was making a real generational change in its leadership, as reflected in the comparative youth of the new ministers.

18. (C) In contrast to Jordanian leaders, Adwan said most in the Palace feel Jordanians on the street have much lower expectations for the new government and are not optimistic about the future. Adwan, echoing a frequently heard observation on Amman's salon circuit, described PM Faisal al-Fayez as a "nice" person and a capable mediator, but was not sure he had the strong personality required to push through difficult political and social reforms. He would need to use his close ties to the King to succeed as prime minister. Another Palace insider who had shared an office with Fayez for eight years said Fayez had not displayed any "flashes of brilliance" during their time together and was ignorant of economics and budgeting, but that he was agreeable and professional in his conduct.

A FEW DISSENTING VOICES

19. (C) Embassy soundings outside the west Amman elite tend to support the results of the CSS poll. An informal survey of FSN family and friends showed little notice or attention given to the new government, much less a conviction that a change in government ministers would have a concrete impact on their lives. Embassy sources indicate that ordinary Jordanians are, in general, not enthusiastic about the new government, see it as no different than previous governments, and dismiss its promises of reform as tired rehashes of previous unfulfilled pledges.

10. (C) We also heard some dissenting voices from the elite, especially among jilted former ministers and statesmen from the older generation who believe that King Abdullah has moved them out of positions of power and influence too soon. Former advisor to King Hussein, Adnan Abu Odeh, for example, commented to PolOff that the ministers' lack of experience and "cultural context" -- particularly those young ministers who spent a good deal of time abroad -- could hinder their efforts to implement much needed changes in Jordan. (The King and others would argue that it is precisely Abu Odeh's "cultural context" -- the decades of Arab political and economic paralysis -- which Jordan needs to escape.) He also criticized the government's decision to postpone dealing with the election law, which he believes politically marginalizes the Palestinian community in Jordan.

11. (C) There are also a few young dissenters. During a meeting with the Ambassador November 23, MP Raed Qaqish (a Christian from Salt) expressed disappointment with the new government and little optimism for real change. Qaqish thought that PM Fayez had made a mistake in not consulting with Parliament before forming the cabinet. He claimed that the ministers were, in general, "out of touch with the reality of the people." Young, pro-reform members of the Parliament (like Qaqish himself, he volunteered) should have been included in the new cabinet, but were instead being "shut out" of government decision-making.

----- COMMENT -----

12. (C) The CSS poll mirrors post's sense of a gap between the expectations of the Jordanian street and the elite regarding the new government and its reform agenda. As is the case with most changes here, those who believe they have the most to gain from reform and liberalization (or simple participation in the government) are optimistic about the new government. Those in the elite who have been sidelined, and poorer Jordanians who do not feel they have a real stake in the government, are less optimistic.

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HALE